

WET

EDWARDS

BLACK

Program text on the occasion of "Black" by Mette Edvardsen at MDT, March 26-27 2011. Printed, folded and stapled on a Konica Minolta Bizhub C220 All-in-one Color Copier in a special cost price edition.

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SOMETHING TO HOLD ONTO

A collection of beginnings and endings for Mette Edvardsen

In front of me on my desk sit four postcards with drawings by Heiko Gölzer. They depict a person with a book, always against a white background. Or better no background at all, just whiteness, the whiteness of the paper, of the page, of nothingness. The person in the drawings isn't quite reading the book, in the empty space it provides him with something to hold onto. He sits on top of it with a pensive attitude. He stands upright, holding the book in his mouth, as if literalizing the thought *everybody's mouth's a book*. He attempts a headstand and perhaps a whole series of yoga positions with books. To eventually lie down, using the book as a pillow to support his head, of which the face has disappeared — a subtle retreat to provide even more space for my imagination. The fifth postcard is missing, leaving a hole in my collection as well as in my memory, if ever there has been one. It has retreated altogether. The book in the drawings is a generic one, white surfaces held together by fine black lines, like a dummy.

More books and papers are stacked or spread on my desk. Normally they live on my bookshelves with many other books, in my archive among many other papers, and in my mind and body, intertwined with yet more memories, thoughts and stories. Now they form a small collection together with the postcards, all of them connected through the work of Mette Edvardsen — at least, that's what brought them together on my desk. I imagine them to be a set of thresholds to my memory, or springboards into an imaginary realm to be discovered — something holding a text. Something to hold onto.

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One of them is a dummy, a fully white book of 256 pages that is an exact copy of another book I have, at least in size, weight, amount of pages and quality of the paper. Once full potentiality, carrying the fantasy of a thousand possible books, it is now charged

with the memory of the one book it became and the composition process that led towards it.

Or take the small black notebook sitting next to it, its pages empty save for lineation. It's the one and only black notebook I possess, awaiting a story. A so-called Moleskine, it is not without history, for these notebooks are famous as the ones in which writer-traveller Bruce Chatwin recorded his personal "songlines". Reaching now for Chatwin's eponymous book, I read: "In France, these notebooks are known as *cahiers moleskines*: 'moleskine', in this case, being its black oilcloth binding. Each time I went to Paris, I would buy a fresh supply from a papeterie in the Rue de l'Ancienne Comédie. The pages were squared and the end-papers held in place with an elastic band. I had numbered them in series. I wrote my name and address on the front page, offering a reward to the finder. To lose a passport was the least of one's worries: to lose a notebook was a catastrophe."

Then there is a book with a green cover and faint lilac lettering: *How To Do Things With Words*. And next to it a bright pink one with green lettering: *How To Do Things With Art*. For now, I place them back on shelf. Also there: a yellow philosophy book that traces yet another beginning: *Zur Welt kommen — Zur Sprache kommen*. Yellow. And a stack of novels by Paul Auster, Italo Calvino and Enrique Vila-Matas I might want to delve into later on.

Three more publications await my attention. They are all by Mette Edvardsen. They are all white with black lettering. The first one is a large size booklet that reads *Opening*. On the first page it says: "This text is a written documentation, a collection of notes, a list of sources, a performance score and a description of the piece *Opening* by Mette Edvardsen." The second one is a book with a white cover, blank except for the spine,

which reads *every now and then*. The third is a booklet with a mere list of words on flimsy paper that makes the words shine through. Its first word is “table”, the last one “black”. In between are all the words used by Mette Edvardsen in her performance *Black*. Here I will start, once more.

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The first page contains thirteen words, one word per line: “table / chair / lamp / shade / light / floor / there / here / one / two / three / steps / plant”. So far the words seem to match the actual situation in my working room. I turn the page. “here / there / water”. Here, the realities of words and things deviate, for I’m drinking coffee, not water. There, I do not hear a knock on the door, but ignore it anyway. A few pages ahead I read “sit / right / now / here / cup / coffee”. That feels better, somehow right. I’m reading the words and also reading my room, verifying whether these words exist out there, sounding their resonance beyond the page. Words and things.

Slowly my memories of the performance come back, but I try to inhibit them and read on. “small / book / big / print / two / three / sticks / and / one / stone / dead / things.” Now my mind travels to another collection of traces from *Black*, an installation in the theatre foyer with black objects arranged in a perpendicular grid, with one empty spot. A page before I had come across a “dog”, or at least the word “dog”. Maybe the animal is still running loose in the theatre. I imagine it sprayed over with mat black paint as well. The telephone goes and I try to ignore it but find I am distracted, can’t tell exactly where I am, where my mind is.

I start reading again from the beginning until “water”, the point of deviation. I know now there is “coffee” ahead, but some words will remain missing. For instance “jazz”, “crocodile”, “sunlight”, or “red / carpet”, not to mention the dust on top of it and the stories swept under. No wait, in the middle of the booklet “dust” is brought to “speak”

and even “sing / song / say / yeah”. And then further on “the / shape / quite / distinct / but / obscured / by / dust” and even more “shapes / and / thickness / of / dust”. I now also remember “tiny / particles”, and looking for the words I discover a “carpet”!

Again my memories of the performance come back, and again I try to inhibit them for a moment and carry on with reading. “cup / plant / chair / window”. I look out of the window and now don’t want to inhibit my memories of the performance any longer. I flip through the booklet until I find the following words: “fresh / air / window / on / one / side / see / nothing / there”. Again I look out of the window, and though the glass is dirty I see something there. Nothing in the text, something out there. This doesn’t feel right. I’m stuck. A window in a text isn’t a window in the world isn’t a window in the theatre. This is the actual point of deviation where one bumps into boundaries. As much as I like to compose my own experience as a reader or spectator, words and things and their particular organisation also have a hand in this, a thousand invisible hands.

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The characters in Paul Auster’s novels often find themselves stuck in a situation, upon which they wipe out their past and start an altogether new life. These haphazard trajectories resonate with the music of chance and with American foundational myths, but foremost they embrace the literary possibility of a life in which experience and emotions are severed from memory. Whilst reading, I’ve always wondered where these realities go. And: who is responsible for these sudden beginnings and endings?

In *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Mr. Blank suffers some kind of writer’s block, haunted as he is by everything he has written in the past. Many characters turn up again and confront their author — Mr. Blank alias N.R. Fanshaw alias Paul Auster — who is for once totally vulnerable, as he realizes something about

time and memory. Where Auster has widely explored the rather ambiguous power of writing to forget, in *Travels in the Scriptorium* this entails a reflection on the violence implicit in authorship. It becomes clear that all these characters have no future because it wasn’t developed by Auster, but also *no past*. They were created to live in the here and now and cut themselves loose from the narrative fabric of their own lives. Now they live in the scriptorium, a kind of asylum where oblivion reigns. Mr. Blank thinks his only chance to go on living is to circumvent his medication, forget about the past and continue writing. No, it actually resides in a few gestures, a choreography of memory almost: he is rocking in his chair, or sliding and skating on the floor in his nylon socks, and finds himself carried back to his childhood.

Reading about her aim “to make things appear” in the announcement of Mette Edvardsen’s *Black*, my first association was another Paul Auster novel I’d recently read. In *Man in the Dark* Auster explores a persona that is at once character and author, pulled back and forth between different realities, eventually trapped in an impossible situation that has both poetical and political overtones. The writer’s fantasy starts like this: “I put him in a hole. That felt like a good start, a promising way to get things going. Put a sleeping man in a hole, and then see what happens when he wakes up and tries to crawl out.”

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“nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing”. In the performance *Black*, Mette Edvardsen says all the words listed in the booklet eight times. It creates a peculiar focus in which appearance and disappearance, beginning and ending are intertwined. *Black* starts in an empty space, a black box, fully and equally lit. Edvardsen summons a table by saying “table table table table table table table table”, subtly underscored by her attentive presence and a hand gesture. Follow a chair, a lamp, plants, a dog, a water bottle and a carpet.

I remember my attention for the conjured objects being held only for as long as the words lasted, they didn’t quite add up to a room. The words’ deictic power pointed to the here and now only — until the moment Edvardsen bumped into the table. “bump bump bump bump bump bump bump bump”.

Words, gestures and the realities they call forth didn’t coincide after all, they had inadvertently grown thick with memories and projections. The steady repetition and staccato rhythm of the words scattered the promise of narrative, time and again creating focus on singular things. Yet as vehicles of attention, their traces would linger in the space and rub against one another in my mind. To sometimes appear out of the blue and, in a performative rather than descriptive act, colour the situation with their detached existence: “yellow yellow yellow yellow yellow yellow yellow yellow”.

Each word contained a particular spell, the hocus pocus of appearance. Holding on to the memory of the table pushed slightly to the right, I revisit the words in the booklet once more, hoping to retrace some of the performance’s beginnings and endings. It’s the latter I keep bumping into, realizing how much the theatre is a space of disappearance after all, of fleeting time, memory and melancholy, and ultimately a place haunted by death. Before closing her eyes and uttering the last word “black”, Edvardsen had pre-empted several endings, talking about dead things and how they don’t change, seeing nothing through the window, or conjuring up a dead body, to later on lie down herself covering up her actual body with a carpet of words and venturing into deep sleep with the wayward logic of a child’s game, or scribbling something on a paper to then crunch it and throw it almost into the bin, successfully cleaning up a wet spot, or saying, accompanied by a clear mimetic gesture, “erase erase erase erase erase erase erase erase”.

Where do these realities go? Some of the objects found their way to substance and

out of the black box to reappear, sprayed over with mat black paint, as a still life in the theatre foyer. Right now, they're probably in a storage space somewhere. Save for the dog, which is still missing. Or maybe they've taken up their place and function in daily life again. As words they ended up in the booklet, a small archive waiting to be revived by readers. And one shouldn't forget the minds and bodies of all the spectators, for memories do linger, just like Mette Edvardsen closing her eyes and uttering the last word "black" while the space remains lit, was as much an ending as a new beginning, not in the least because it's the one word she'd said only once, suspending the seven repetitions and turning the single word into a beacon marking a promise. "black black black black black black black black".

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Knowing there would be a dog running loose in this text and the literary memory of a cat abiding with me at my working table, I dug into Enrique Vila-Matas' novel *Bartleby & Co.*, looking for a horse and ready for a surprise. In this book the narrator seeks to overcome a substantial writer's block lasting for twenty-five years by documenting the many endings and the "negative impulse and attraction towards nothingness" that populate contemporary literature and prevent certain authors from writing altogether. It results in the compilation of footnotes commenting on an invisible text, a text to come.

In footnote 28 the narrator admits to a friend that "I once spent a whole summer with the idea that I had been a horse. At night the idea became obsessive, it homed in on me. It was terrible. No sooner did I put my man's body to bed than my horse's memory came alive." His friend points out that "nothing you say surprises me" and that the so-called exclusive experience concerns actually the embodiment of a story by Felisberto Hernández. Creator of a "fictional phantom space" and of "strangled voices", this inventor of absence was famous for leaving his stories unfinished or at least open-ended.

Revisiting these stories, Vila-Matas' commentator is particularly intrigued by one of them: "Many of his unfinished endings are unforgettable. Like that of 'No-One Turned the Lights On', where he tells us he was 'among the last, bumping into the furniture'. An unforgettable ending. Sometimes I play at thinking no-one in my house turns the lights on. From today, having recovered the memory of Felisberto's tales without and ending, I shall also play at being the last, bumping into the furniture. I like my lonely man's parties. They are like life itself, like any of Felisberto's stories: an unfinished party, but a real party at that."

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"I am a cat. As yet I have no name. I have no idea were I was born." These words reached me via Mette Edvardsen's mouth, reciting the opening pages of Soseki Natsume's novel *I am a cat* to me in November last year in the Public Library of Leuven, the town where I was born. Together with a group of people she had learned a book by heart, safeguarding it from censorship, disappearance or being burned, like in Ray Bradbury's SF-novel *Fahrenheit 451*. As living books they were walking around in the library, conversing, reading, looking out of the window, or accompanying a reader to a quiet spot. Thus I was listening to her, or better *reading* the novel. I remember Edvardsen's soft parlando rhythm, shunning theatricality or the expressive way in which one tends to read stories to children. This retreat didn't make her a ventriloquist, but allowed me to enter the book and identify with the adventures of a cat observing people. By the time the cat described the impression of oddity when it first saw a human being, it didn't come to me as a surprise. After half an hour Edvardsen said: "I will stop here, if that's okay."

I looked for another book and met a man telling me "I am the *Man behind the window*. My author is Gerrit Krol, who wrote me in 1982." And after a physical self-description — colour, amount of chapters and pages, cover text — asked me where I wanted to

start reading. Since I have the habit of reading books from the beginning, I started with the first page, to then continue chapter after chapter. The main character Adam is a robot, born as a small black box and reflecting upon its becoming more and more human, which doesn't happen without glitches despite its striving for perfection. The language of computer code doesn't quite place Adam in this world, and when his hardware is worn, he ends up in the trash bin. He knows poetry and emotions, but vulnerability remains maybe the one thing inaccessible to him.

When his leg happens to be stuck and won't afford him the ease of walking, I got excited and started to run, browsing through the book more quickly and skipping chapters, eager to track down and read all the passages about walking and leg gesture. The living book knew where they were and found them effortlessly inside his chest. Now my memory fails me to reproduce them, though I remember thinking of Roland Topor's *The Tenant*, in which a loose limb inspires a meditation upon identity, a passage I do actually recall without its paper support: "I was wondering. A tooth is a part of ourselves, isn't it? Like... a bit of our personality. I remember in the newspaper, a man lost his arm in an accident and wanted to have it buried in the cemetery. The authorities refused. The arm was cremated and that was that. I wonder if they refused to give him the ashes and if so, by what right? Tell me. At what precise moment does an individual stop being who he thinks he is? Cut off my arm. I say, 'me and my arm.' You cut off my other arm. I say, 'me and my two arms.' You take out my stomach, my kidneys, assuming that were possible... and I say, 'me and my intestines.' Follow me? And now, if you cut off my head would I say, 'me and my head' or 'me and my body'? What right has my head to call itself me? What right?"

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Hanging around in the library after *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* I

had a great time fantasizing about books I would like to learn by heart, store them word after word in my mind and body. I quickly came up with two candidates, not simply my favourite books, but books I thought would somehow also create a perspective upon the embodiment of books, upon becoming a book oneself. Still considering my eventual choice, I haven't started learning either of them yet.

As if guided by the question how one stands in the world, Italo Calvino embarks in *Mr. Palomar* on descriptions of visual experience, anthropological commentaries and meditations that venture into the speculative, all of this neatly organized into brief chapters according to specific rules. His protagonist starts on the shore, aiming to read the waves, or better to look more closely by isolating and analyzing a single wave, and somewhat later finds himself swimming in the sea, surrounded by the late afternoon sun just before it sets, pondering whether the rays of light exist out there or in his mind only, and while his strokes grow weary and hesitant, his thoughts navigate a disembodied world until floating debris makes him feel like a corpse. "Mr. Palomar thinks of the world without him: that endless world before his birth, and that far more obscure world after his death; he tries to imagine the world before his eyes, any eyes; and a world that tomorrow, through catastrophe or slow corrosion, will be left blind. What happens (happened, will happen) in that world?"

In front of me I have two copies of Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*, in Dutch and English translations. Which language should I choose? Unfortunately I don't read or speak Italian, or better I don't understand the words and would find myself curiously out of sync in case I'd learn the book by heart. Perhaps the experience wouldn't be unlike one of the anecdotes Laurie Anderson tells between the songs of her *Live at Town Hall*. "Lately, I've been doing a lot of concerts in French. Unfortunately, I don't speak French. I memorize it. I mean, my mouth is moving but I don't understand what I'm saying. It's like

sitting at the breakfast table and it's early in the morning and you're not quite awake. And you're just sitting there eating cereal and sort of staring at the writing on the box — not reading it exactly, just more or less looking at the words. And suddenly, for some reason, you snap to attention, and you realize that what you're reading is what you're eating... but by then it's much too late."

I pick up the book with the yellow cover, philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's *Zur Welt kommen — Zur Sprache kommen*. Since it contains a series of lectures, I imagine Sloterdijk's words would flow with a certain ease from my mouth. Or perhaps they would stumble once in a while, for German is not my native language after all, though I do read, speak and understand it. The words might displace me, but then language also places one in this world. Such is exactly the philosopher's take on the meaning of literature, which is indebted to the "preliterary text of life". While Mr. Palomar is swimming in the ocean facing death, Sloterdijk travels down the other end, desiring to be afloat in the womb yet facing the impossibility of being present at one's own beginning, one's coming into the world and coming to language. We are brought to speech by others, relieved by a long tradition of storytelling: we don't begin, we *are* begun. "Man covers up the gap of origin with stories, and starts to be entangled in narratives, because he is a being that can't own his beginning." Between one's physical and narrative births resides what Sloterdijk calls the "dark, speechless nights of the infant", resonant in one's life and stories as the memory of a profound silence.

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The white book came in a small, brown paper bag, an aid to carry it home after Mette Edvardsen's performance every *now and then*. Along with the book I have kept the bag, a real copy of the paper bags that also appear in three sizes — small, large, extra large — in photographs in the book. Opening the book, the white cover turns into a double

black page, a black piece of paper twinned with a photograph of a black floor and curtain reminiscent of a black box theatre. Am I a reader or a spectator, or both? Meeting two protagonists standing, looking, walking, I follow them on a walk, not so much into but through the book, from left to right, from cover to cover.

The book contains photographs only, sometimes an empty or coloured page, no written words, save for the title on the spine, every *now and then*. Even when the protagonists bring in a microphone, the book remains curiously silent. Turning the pages, I remember the noise of a large group of spectators with this book in their laps, flipping through the pages, duly following the performance's unfolding, setting about their own mental voyages upon a deviation of photographed and enacted scenes, quickly paging ahead looking for coincidence, slowing down again when taken by surprise or when the performers on stage claimed the attention. The sound of a hundred or so people flicking the pages was an auditory trace of everyone composing their own experience, jumping between the offered markers of attention, all the while observing their decisions — a noisy flurry in itself stirring one's imagination in the shared space provided by the theatre. Now I am alone with the book, struck by the silence of the microphone, the empty page at its base and the objects sitting around, all of this in contrast with the subtle sounds of my flick upon flick.

A chair, a plant, an apple, a water bottle, a notebook, a cup — as traces of earlier performances, all these objects, as well as the actions they afford and the memories they carry, are swept under the carpet, muffled by the space, swallowed by a black page. They yield to a white page, to new objects, coloured shirts and coloured pages. White. Grey. Red. Green. Yellow. Blue. Once the stuff is cleared out, the sansevieria, truncated throughout most of the book, appears for the first time in full, as a new beginning. Then, after dimming the light the

page turns black again, and the protagonists return to take a bow.

The book doesn't contain traditional credits, but lines up the protagonists and all the objects, from the speechless microphone to a stack of white paper and a roll of blue tape. There is one object that must have appeared both in the book and in the performance every *now and then* without my noticing it: a brown padded envelope, so many of which featured in Mette Edvardsen's group performance *or else nobody will know*. It's a piece of unaddressed mail, like a message in a bottle, adrift in the theatre and the book, waiting to arrive at an uncertain destiny, or perhaps turning into a dead letter.

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Reading the performance score of *Opening*, I would expect it to transport me about six years back in time to the Hebbel theatre in

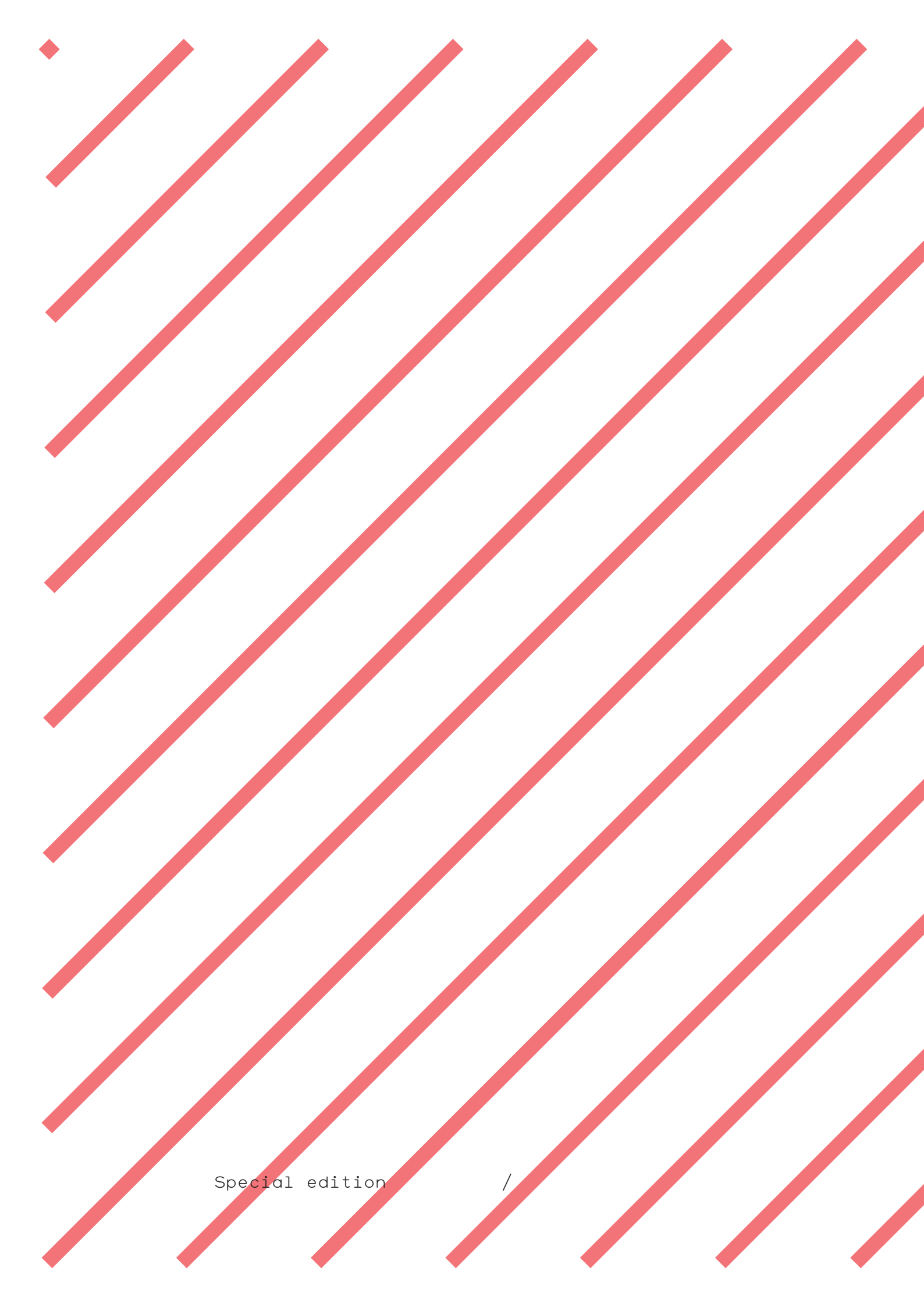
Berlin, but it does not. My memories have faded and the words demand attention for themselves. I am still seated at the table in my working room, once in a while looking out of the window, looking for something, or reading, looking for something to hold onto. "Enter. Blackout. Exit. Lights. Enter. Look out. Blackout. Exit. Enter with lights. Look out. Stop front. Blackout. Exit. Enter. Stop front. Wait. Lights. Blackout stage left. Wait. Lights." Entrances and exits, sounds and silences, light changes and blackouts, openings and deaths. BANG!!! An explosion wakes me up and I decide not to wait for the final blackout. Instead, "I have a small moment to myself in the wings while I quickly change shoes from green to black. In the theatre the colour green means bad luck. I was told that in Spain it is the colour yellow."

Jeroen Peeters for Mette Edvardsen
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MDT is an international co-production platform and a leading venue for contemporary choreography and performance situated in a reconstructed torpedo workshop in the Stockholm city center. MDT has since 1986 supported and collaborated with Swedish and international emerging artists. MDT is supported by Kulturrådet, Kulturförvaltningen Stockholm stad and Kulturförvaltningen Stockholms läns landsting.

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